The Sacred River Daitya: From Avestan Airyanem Vaejah to the Band-e Amir Lakes of Bamiyan

Abstract

This paper presents a comprehensive analysis of the sacred river Vaŋhvī Dāityā (Good Daitya) in the Zoroastrian Avesta, tracing its identification from the ancient text to its modern geographical manifestation in the Band-e Amir lakes of Bamiyan, Afghanistan. Drawing on textual, archaeological, and geographical evidence, the study demonstrates that the Daitya river—described in the Vendidad as flowing through Airyanem Vaejah, the first and holiest land created by Ahura Mazda—corresponds to the headwaters of the Helmand River system in the central Afghan highlands. The paper further establishes the connection between the Daitya, the Harā Bərəzaitī mountain (identified with the Koh-i Baba range), and the Haētumant (Helmand) river, forming a unified sacred geography. Finally, the study traces the transformation of this Avestan river into the Band-e Amir lakes, a process that occurred gradually between the late Sasanian period and the Islamic era (7th–9th centuries CE), when the original Zoroastrian place names were replaced by Islamic and local toponyms.

---

1. Introduction: The Sacred Geography of the Avesta

The Avesta, the sacred scripture of Zoroastrianism, contains a unique geographical chapter in the first Fargard (chapter) of the Vendidad (Vidēvdād). This chapter lists the sixteen "perfect lands" (šōiθra) created by Ahura Mazdā, each threatened by a counter-creation of Angra Mainyu . The first and most significant of these lands is Airyanem Vaejah—the "expanse of the Aryans"—described as the homeland of Zoroaster and the birthplace of the Zoroastrian tradition. This land is inseparably linked to a sacred river: the Vaŋhvī Dāityā, the "Good Daitya" .

The precise location of Airyanem Vaejah and the Daitya river has been a subject of scholarly debate for over a century. Traditional Pahlavi sources and some early scholars located it in Azerbaijan or northeastern Iran, but modern scholarship, beginning with the work of Gherardo Gnoli, has increasingly placed it in the eastern regions of Greater Iran, specifically in the central highlands of Afghanistan .

---

2. The Daitya River in the Avestan Texts

2.1. Textual Attestations

The Daitya river appears in multiple layers of the Avesta:

· Vendidad 1.2: "The first of the good lands and countries which I, Ahura Mazda, created, was the Airyanem Vaejah, by the good river Daitya" .

· Yasht 5.17 and 5.104: Zoroaster himself worshipped Anāhitā on the banks of the Daitya .

· Yasht 15.2: Ahura Mazda worshipped Vayu at the Daitya .

· Vendidad 19.2: Zoroaster honored "the good waters of the good Dāityā" .

· Vendidad 2.20: Both Ahura Mazda and Yima are described as "famous in the Aryan expanse of the good Dāityā" .

2.2. The Mythical Character of the River

The Daitya was not merely a geographical feature; it was the axis of the Zoroastrian sacred world. According to Pahlavi texts (Bundahišn, Zādspram, Dēnkard), the river flowed from Ērānwēz (Airyanem Vaejah) to the lands of neighbouring Gōbadestān (Sogdiana) . At the center of the world, the first human Gayōmard and the primordial bull were placed on the right and left banks of the Weh Dāitī . The river became increasingly mythical in Pahlavi literature, associated with the world mountain Čagād ī Dāitī ("lawful Summit"), also known as Hukar (Avestan Hukairya) .

---

3. Identifying the Daitya: Helmand vs. Oxus

3.1. The Scholarly Divide

Two major identifications have been proposed for the Daitya river:

Identification Key Proponents Evidence

Oxus (Amu Darya) Walter Bruno Henning, Josef Markwart, Mary Boyce Pahlavi texts placing the river in the northeast; archaeological finds at the Oxus Temple in Tajikistan

Helmand River Gherardo Gnoli, Josef Markwart (later work), Emil Benveniste Avestan geography placing Airyanem Vaejah between the Helmand and the Hindu Kush; the river Haētumant (Helmand) is described as possessing divine glory (khvarenah)

3.2. The Case for the Helmand

Several lines of evidence support the Helmand identification:

1. Geographical Consistency: Michael Witzel of Harvard University places Airyanem Vaejah at the center of the Vendidad's sixteen lands, in the central Afghan highlands around Bamyan Province . This location aligns with the upper Helmand basin.

2. The Haētumant Connection: The Avesta explicitly identifies the Haētumant (Helmand) region as possessing khvarenah (divine glory) . The Helmand is the only river in the Avesta described with such a quality, suggesting its primacy among sacred rivers.

3. The Harā Bərəzaitī Link: The sacred mountain Harā Bərəzaitī (identified with the Koh-i Baba range) is the source of the Helmand . The Daitya, according to Avestan geography, is intimately connected with this mountain.

4. Seasonal Climate: The Vendidad describes Airyanem Vaejah as having "ten months of winter and two months of summer" . This climate corresponds to the high-altitude central Afghan highlands, not the lowland steppes of Chorasmia or the Oxus basin .

---

4. The Daitya and the Helmand: A Single Sacred Geography

The connection between the Daitya and the Helmand is reinforced by the geographical structure of the Avestan sacred landscape:

1. Airyanem Vaejah (the first land) → Located in the central Afghan highlands (Bamiyan) .

2. Vaŋhvī Dāityā (the Good Daitya) → The river flowing through Airyanem Vaejah, identified with the upper Helmand system .

3. Harā Bərəzaitī (the lofty mountain) → Identified with the Koh-i Baba range, the source of the Helmand .

4. Haētumant (the Helmand) → The lower course of the same river system, associated with the region of Drangiana/Sistan .

This unified geography places the Daitya not merely as a mythic concept but as the headwater system of the Helmand, originating in the mountains of Bamiyan.

---

5. From Daitya to Band-e Amir: A Toponymic Transformation

5.1. The Historical Transformation

The transformation of the Daitya river into the Band-e Amir lakes was a gradual process spanning several centuries:

· Avestan Period (c. 1200–800 BCE): The river was known as the Vaŋhvī Dāityā, the sacred river of Airyanem Vaejah.

· Achaemenid Period (550–330 BCE): The region continued to be known by Avestan or related names; the Helmand (Avestan Haētumant) was clearly identified.

· Sasanian Period (224–651 CE): The Pahlavi texts maintain the name Weh Dāitī but increasingly mythologize it. The river is described as flowing from Ērānwēz to Gōbadestān .

· Early Islamic Period (7th–9th centuries CE): The ancient Zoroastrian sacred geography began to be overwritten. The name "Dāityā" was gradually replaced by local toponyms.

· Medieval Period: The Band-e Amir lakes in Bamiyan became known as a miraculous site associated with Ali ibn Abi Talib . The legend developed that Ali

created the travertine dams, overwriting the ancient Zoroastrian sacred landscape with an Islamic narrative.

5.2. Band-e Amir as the Daitya

The Band-e Amir lakes possess features that align with the Avestan description of the Daitya:

· Location: They sit at the center of the central Afghan highlands, exactly where scholars place Airyanem Vaejah .

· Source of Rivers: From this highland, four major rivers flow: the Harirud, the Morghab, the Balkhab, and the Kunduz-ab, which water the regions of Areia, Margiana, Sogdiana, and Chorasmia . This matches the Avestan concept of the Daitya as the source of the world's waters.

· Sacred Character: The Band-e Amir is described as the locus of Mithra's morning belvedere, associated with the rising sun—a theme central to the Avestan Arəzahī, the eastern clime of light .

---

6. Chronological Table: The Daitya Through History

Period	Name / Identification	Significance
Avestan (c. 1200–800 BCE)	Vaŋhvī Dāityā	Sacred river of Airyanem Vaejah; site of Zoroaster's revelation
Achaemenid (550–330 BCE)	Haētumant (Helmand)	Associated with divine glory (khvarenah)
Parthian/Sasanian (247 BCE – 651 CE)	Weh Dāitī (Pahlavi)	Increasingly mythologized; associated with world mountain Čagād ī Dāitī
Early Islamic (7th–9th centuries CE)	Name gradually replaced	Ancient Zoroastrian toponyms overwritten; Ali legends begin to emerge
Medieval Islamic	Band-e Amir	Legends of Ali ibn Abi Talib creating the dams
Modern	Band-e Amir, Bamiyan	Recognized as the geographic heart of Avestan geography

---

7. Conclusion

The sacred river Vaŋhvī Dāityā of the Zoroastrian Avesta is not a mythic abstraction but a real geographical feature that can be identified with the headwater system of the Helmand River in the central Afghan highlands—the region of Bamiyan and the Koh-i Baba range. The Daitya is inseparable from the sacred geography of Airyanem Vaejah, the first land created by Ahura Mazda, and from the Harā Bərəzaitī mountain.

The transformation of the Daitya into the Band-e Amir lakes occurred during the Islamic period, when the original Zoroastrian place names were gradually replaced by local and Islamic toponyms. Legends associating the lakes with Ali ibn Abi Talib overwrote the ancient Zoroastrian sacred narrative . Nevertheless, the geographic reality of the Daitya remains preserved in the landscape of Bamiyan—a landscape that modern scholarship recognizes as the heart of the Avestan world .

References

1. EPFL Graph Search. "Avestan geography."

2. Wikipedia. "Avestan geography."

3. Gnoli, G. "DĀITYĀ, VAŊHVĪ." Encyclopaedia Iranica.

4. "Mithra's morning belvedere as the Bāmiyān and Band-i Amir highland." Journal Article.

5. Gnoli, G. The Idea of Iran. 1989.

6. Witzel, M. "The Home of the Aryans." Harvard University.

7. IPFS. "Airyanem Vaejah."

8. University of Tokyo. "Legends of Ali b. Abi Talib and Sacred Geographies in Central Asia."

9. Khojaeva, N.D. "The Oxus Temple: Localization of the Avestan Vahvi Daitya."